

# Natural selection

Joan Hardie is a Cockermouth-based potter whose work captures the essence of the leaves, lichen and bark she finds out walking. **Mary Ingham** meets her



The pottery opened three years ago in Cockermouth's Market Place



On show are Joan Hardie's finished pieces as well as works in progress



Joan's trademark ceramics include this fern frond vase

**T**he defining moment of Joan Hardie's artistic life came when she and her husband Jack, on a long weekend in Barcelona, saw a work by Claudi Cassanovas at an exhibition of contemporary ceramics.

It was suspended by huge chains, a vertical disc with "no glaze but all texture" – in part like craters on the moon and in part like lava into which a stone had been dropped.

"It blew me away. No work of art had ever had such an effect on me," says Joan. She'd been producing ceramics as a hobby for decades but decided there and then to become a full-time potter.

Her ambition was realised and she now runs Bitter Beck Pottery in premises acquired a little more than three years ago in Cockermouth's Market Place. Finished pieces and works in progress are on display in the shop and the tiny back room is the clean and orderly pottery itself with the biggest electric kiln Joan could fit through the door.

"Most potteries have a showroom and the pottery out of site. I wanted people to see how I made things and the different stages.

"It's only a little place but the more you look the more you see," says Joan. And it's her own ability to see so much in the natural world that inspires her work which makes the form and texture of her bowls, vases, and wall collages so striking.

Her "mission", says Joan, is to encourage people to look at the natural world with fresh eyes: "I try to get something of the feel of a natural object but to give the work a life of its own."

When she and Jack lived for a year in London, where she also worked for 20 years, the best thing about the capital, she says, was the plane trees with "really scabby bark and beautiful leaves".

Joan works from photographs of bark, lichen, and fungi and uses leaves to make detailed impressions and shapes, pressing them into wet clay with a rolling pin and cutting round them with a fine point. When the clay has dried slightly she peels the leaves off, avoiding creating smoke by burning them off in the kiln.

You don't think of pottery as a seasonal activity, says Joan, but for a wall collage of autumnal maple leaves, for example, you have to start with the real things.

"I spend my life looking round hedgerows and trees, spotting possibilities. In winter I do more abstract stuff or fall back on evergreens or savoy cabbages," says Joan, referring to a vase in which the cellular divisions of the cabbage leaf are captured precisely.

Just out of the kiln when I visit the pottery are three bowls based on fern fronds but "with a life of their own, a bit sea-creaturish".

"It pleases me to make something with such growth and movement out of something as durable as pottery,



Joan Hardie became a full-time potter after seeing work at a ceramics exhibition in Barcelona. 'It blew me away' she says Photographs: Phil Rigby

which will be there in 1,000 years if no-one drops it," says Joan.

Work such as her wall collage of lichen on a tree is both tactile and colourful. "Colour is hard to deal with in ceramics," says Joan. "I've developed the palette I use for collages in the time I've been here. You need a lot of glazes and different approaches."

One of her most striking pieces is a plain dish with a decoration of blue geranium leaves with delicate veins. "Geranium leaves are green, of course, but it doesn't matter. I do green, too, but they are not as nice." Doing decorative work of this kind is a morning job, says Joan, for which you require a good eye, lots of attention and a steady hand. She uses metallic oxide rather than paint so there is no room for error.

Much of her work is made with white stoneware clay – in fact buff-coloured – and she uses a variety of other clays to get different effects. "Most potters stick to one sort of clay and a small number of glazes. I don't," says Joan. "I'm about doing a bit of this and that."

"Some of my work is very representational, other pieces you can take out of their context. They have a natural feel but not everyone interprets them in the same way."

Joan exhibits her work through Northern Potters and at Potfest, and has solo exhibitions. Her work is also sold in a handful of galleries which have sought her out, including Gossipgate in Alston. "I put all my effort into encouraging people to come here," says Joan. "After commuting for 30 years, I don't want to spend my life driving round galleries and fairs. Some people happen upon the pottery and others find my brochures throughout the north west and make trips to it."

Born in the Wirral and brought up in south Manchester, Joan has been making pots since 1971 when she and Jack began taking evening classes. She taught physics for 10 years and was an Open University

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teacher before moving into marketing and business planning. By the time of the Barcelona weekend, she was a self-employed management consultant and Jack, who'd also taught physics, a tutor at a management college. Having had her "On the road to Damascus" moment, Joan reduced her working hours to take an adult education course in ceramics then did a year's professional development course for designer makers in London. "I'd done an MBA along the way and knew the big business stuff. But whatever you go into, you have to know the market – in my case, how galleries work and how to put on an exhibition."

The couple had been visiting the Lakes every year since the early Seventies and – after living in Manchester, Hertfordshire, Hong Kong, and London – moved to Cumbria a few years ago after Jack, now a graphic designer and part-time potter, had retired early and done an art and design degree.

Passionate hill walkers, Joan and Jack have set about achieving not just all the Wainwrights but all the different routes too "which gets us out every week. The only problem is that the really inspirational stuff for me is the woody bit at the bottom so we are always late going up the hill."

Whenever they are out, they take large numbers of photographs and the best are made into a "Mac" book every year.

Joan also teaches beginner and "improver" classes at the pottery and enjoys the creativity and individuality revealed in her students. "Their personalities show from their first pot and I try hard to teach them to implement their own ideas," she says.

### Information

Bitter Beck Pottery, 11 Market Place, Cockermouth.  
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